**The Concept of English for Specific Purposes**

English for specific purposes (ESP) teaching conducted to equip learners with a certain English proficiency level for a situation where the language is going to be used, termed target needs. Since it provides instructional objectives, materials and methods developed on the basis of learners’ needs and potential of interests, from the early 1960s, ESP has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of English foreign language. Nowadays, ESP is not only applied for adults of English language learners who have mastered basic level of English proficiency or those with specific purposes of learning English, but also is adopted for English language learners learning general English.

**The Definition of ESP**

Many definitions are given to ESP. Some people describe ESP as simply being the teaching of English for any purpose that could be specified. Others, however, are more precise, describing it as the teaching of English used in academic studies or the teaching of English for vocational or professional purposes, or as the teaching of English for nonnative speakers of English who learn English on specific purposes.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.19) define ESP as an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learners’ reason in learning. Robinson (1991, p.1) viewed ESP as an enterprise involving education, training, and practice and drawing upon three major realisms of knowledge namely language, pedagogy, and students’/participants’ specialist area of interest. Richards and Rodger (2001, p.107) saw ESP as a movement that seeks to serve the language needs of learners who need English in order to carry out specific roles (e.g. student, engineer, nurse) and who need to acquire content and real-world skills through the medium of it rather than master the language for its own shake.

The more detail definition of ESP comes from Strevens (1998) who defined ESP as a particular case of general category of special purpose language teaching. He further revealed that the definition of ESP is needed to distinguish between four absolute and **two variable characteristics**. The **four absolute characteristics** of ESP consist of English language teaching, they are:

1. design to meet specific needs of the learners,

2. related to content (i.e. in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations, and activities,

3. centered on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc and analysis of this discourse, and

4. differentiated to General English.

While the two variable characteristics are ESP may be, but is not necessarily:

1. restricted as to the language skills to be learned (e.g. reading only),

2. not taught according to any pre-ordained methodology. (Strevens, 1998, p.1-2)

Dudley-Evans (1998) improved the definition of ESP offered by Strevens substantially by removing the absolute characteristics that ESP is “in contrast with ‘General English’, and has revised and increased the number of variable characteristics. The definition of ESP, therefore, in terms of absolute and variable characteristics given by Dudley-Evans:

**Absolute Characteristics**

1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners,

2. ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves,

3. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in term of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse, and genre.

**Variable Characteristics**

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines,

2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English,

3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level,

4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students,

5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems (Dudley-Evans, 1998)

It is agreed that the most primary account of ESP is that any decision made in designing language teaching programs should hinge on the learners’ needs for learning English. Related to this, the word “specific” in ESP has different interpretation along with the development of this area. In 1960’s it meant a list of technical vocabulary of a given field or profession (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p.9; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p.1; Smoak, 2003, p.23). In 1980’s up to now it refers to the learners’ needs and interests (Stevens, 1988, p.2).

Based on the definitions given, ESP is understood to be about preparing learners to use English within academic, professional, or workplace environments, where the language is going to be used. In ESP, English is learnt not for its own sake or for the sake of gaining a general education but to smooth the path to entry or greater linguistic efficiency in particular environments (Basturkmen, 2006, p.18).

**ESP as an Approach to Language Teaching**

The definition given by Dudley-Evan that consists of three absolute and five variable characteristics, represents an insight that ESP can but is not necessarily concerned with a specific discipline, nor it does have to be aimed at a certain age group or ability range. It simply should be seen as an approach to teaching, or what Dudley-Evans describes as an ‘attitude of mind’. This is a similar assumption to that proposed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.19) who state that ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning.

The meaning of the word ‘special’ in ESP more confirms the rule of ESP as an approach to language teaching in which content and method applied based on the learner’s need of learning. In the other words, a specialized aim refers to the purpose for which learners learn a language, not the nature of the language they learn (Mackay & Mountford, 1978). Consequently, as an approach, ESP has typically functioned to help language learners cope with the features of language or to develop the competencies needed to function in a discipline, profession, or workplace for which the learners want to master English.

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